

How much would our health benefit from leaving the car at home?

June 27 2012



The WHO states that it is necessary to do at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise per week. Credit: Jeremy Brooks

A new study confirms that doing short journeys on foot rather than taking the car or motorbike would avoid the death of 108 men and 79 women a year in Catalonia alone. This would imply annual savings of more than 200 million euros.

Researchers from the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) and the Barcelona [Public Health Agency](#) (ASPB), headed by Catherine Pérez from the Healthcare Information Systems Service, have estimated the yearly economic benefits from a reduction in death rates by substituting at least one short vehicle journey for a walk.

The authors conducted a cross-sectional study based on Catalonia's

Mobility Survey performed by the Generalitat and the Metropolitan Transport Agency in 2006 which documents the journeys of more than one hundred thousand people.

Then, 80,552 individuals over 17 years of age who did at least one journey were selected and researchers calculated the number of men and women who did not meet daily physical exercise recommendations but travelled by car or motorbike for journeys up to five minutes long.

In order to calculate the annual economic benefits, the 'Health Economic Evaluation Tool (HEAT)' was used. It was designed by the WHO and estimates the benefits of reduced mortality by increasing physical exercise.

For their economic estimations, as set out by HEAT, the researchers took in account certain parameters: 150 minutes walked each week, a relative risk of 0.78 for all deaths linked to walking half an hour a day, a mortality rate in Spain of 21,349 deaths per 100,000 people between the ages of 20 and 49 years and a statistical value of a person's life of €1,300,000 according to the "willingness to pay" methodology.

This study has been published in the *European Journal of Public Health* and its results reveal that 77.2% of men and 67.7% of women in Catalonia do not reach recommended daily amounts of physical exercise when walking.

"However, 15.6% and 13.9% respectively would reach recommendations if they were to substitute at least one short, 5 minute vehicle journey," as explained to SINC by Marta Olabarria, lead author of the study.

When applied to the population of Catalonia, this would mean that 326,557 men and 252,509 women would meet recommendations. According to the estimations made using HEAT, this new form of

physical activity would avoid 108.4 deaths in men and 79.2 in women. In turn, this would bring about savings of €124,216,000 and €84,927,000 respectively.

Walking is a sport

Through the Global Strategy on Diet Physical Activity and [Health](#), the WHO states that it is necessary to do at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise per week. Walking to get around is considered a moderate [physical activity](#) and is perfect to meet exercise recommendations.

More information: Marta Olabarria, Katherine Pérez, Elena Santamariña-Rubio, Ana M Novoa, Francesca Racioppi. "Health impact of motorised trips that could be replaced by walking". *European Journal of Public Health*, 1-6, junio de 2011.

Provided by Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT)

Citation: How much would our health benefit from leaving the car at home? (2012, June 27)
retrieved 20 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-06-health-benefit-car-home.html>

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